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ABSTRACT

This study examined college students' views of their "academic possible selves," how these possible selves vary by social group, and how students view the chance of becoming that possible self and the importance of and their power to attain that possible self. Participants were 126 college students enrolled in an introductory educational psychology course at a large southwestern research university. Women comprised 49 percent of the sample and ethnic minorities constituted 39 percent. Students' positive and negative possible selves were assessed using an open-ended protocol in which they were asked to think of what they were like in terms of academics and to list three positive possible selves and three negative possible selves. Participants also rated each self-schema's importance and reported how efficacious they felt about attaining positive possible selves and avoiding negative possible selves. Finally students estimated the likelihood of hoped-for and feared possible selves. Results yielded a diverse and complex array of self-conceptions. The open-ended technique appeared to be effective. Patterns of possible selves varied by gender and ethnicity. Females appeared to place very high importance on possible selves relating to effort and achievement but reported lower levels of efficacy (compared to males) in avoiding feared possible selves. (Contains 23 references.) (JB)

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Gender and ethnic differences in college students' academic possible selves

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Abstract

The goals of this paper were to address students' perceptions of the self and to extend the literature about student self-concept in three ways. First, by directing our investigation toward students' academic *possible* selves, thereby adding a telic component to self-concept. Second, by introducing a new, self-report, open-ended methodology for measuring possible selves, allowing us to more fully preserve the respondent's voice and to tap into the multifaceted nature of self-beliefs. Finally, by discussing how possible selves may vary by gender and ethnicity, addressing the role of social grouping in academic self-concept. We examined college students' (n = 126) reports of their academic possible selves and found that the perceived likelihood and importance of possible selves, as well as efficacy in attaining (or avoiding, in the case of feared possible selves) possible selves varied according to gender and ethnicity. The open-ended method for measuring self-schemas also provided a rich, descriptive account of beliefs related to the self. This technique, combined with the questions measuring importance, efficacy, and likelihood, may prove to be a more valid approach to measuring beliefs about the self.

Gender and ethnic differences in college students' academic possible selves

Students' academic-related perceptions have been shown to be intimately linked to their achievement behaviors and performance (e.g., Schunk & Meece, 1992). Indeed, the literature on self-regulated learning has added to our understanding of classroom learning by highlighting the interdependence of "skill" (learning strategies) and "will" (motivational factors which include perceptions) (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1982; Pintrich, 1989; Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). A great deal of research within educational psychology has focused upon student perceptions, including self-efficacy, attributions, control beliefs, goal orientations, and beliefs about the self (Schunk & Meece, 1992). The goal of this paper is to address students' perceptions of the self, and to extend the literature about student self-concept in three ways. First, by directing our investigation toward students' academic *possible* selves, thereby adding a telic component to self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Second, by introducing a new, self-report, open-ended methodology for measuring possible selves, allowing us to more fully preserve the respondent's voice and to tap into the multifaceted nature of self-beliefs (Deutsch, Kroll, Weible, Letourneau, & Goss, 1988; Garcia, 1993). Finally, by discussing how possible selves may vary by gender and ethnicity, addressing the role of social grouping in academic self-concept (cf. Garcia & Pintrich, 1993; Marsh, 1990; 1992; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Marsh & O'Neill, 1984).

In the past, researchers tended to view self-concept as a global, relatively stable entity, or as a generalized, average view of the self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). In contrast, more recent formulations of

the self-concept have incorporated advances made in cognitive psychology, and portray the self-concept as a constellation of cognitive schemas, or networks of knowledge about the self (Markus and her colleagues). Self-schemas can therefore be defined as cognitive-affective representations of ourselves in different contexts. As such, we may characterize self-schemas according to four dimensions: affect (we hold both positive and negative beliefs about ourselves); value (certain selves are more central, and are chronically accessible to working memory); efficacy (beliefs about the possibility of maintenance or modification); and temporal sign (we possess not only conceptions of ourselves now, but also of what we have been, and what we may become) (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994). Possible selves build in a telic component to self-concept, extending beliefs about the self from simply "who I am now" to "who I might become." A crucial function of possible selves is that they serve as incentives for behavior, creating personalized goals which the individual is motivated to approach ("hoped-for" possible selves) or to avoid ("feared" possible selves) (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986). In addition, having a particular possible self active within working memory may help to prime other relevant schemas such as scripts for various study strategies, or beliefs regarding one's value for the task, or concerns about performance, thus helping to draw parameters around achievement-related behavior (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Markus, Cross, & Wurf, 1990; Ruvulo & Markus, 1992). Indeed, self-schemas (both present selves and possible selves) have been linked to student motivation, study strategies, and performance (Garcia, 1993; Garcia & Pintrich, 1993; Pintrich, Garcia, & De Groot, 1994; Ruvulo & Markus, 1992).

However, previous work on self-concept has tended to conflate academic self-conceptions with conceptions of abilities, or has relied upon standardized protocols which force the respondent to use an organization constructed by the researcher (Deutsch et al., 1988). That is, extremity has been confounded with descriptiveness; rating an item as "very much like me" or "definitely true of me" does not address the issue of salience. In other words, rating a descriptor as moderately true of oneself should not preclude having an elaborate structure of knowledge with regard to that descriptor. For example, a student may rate the "I am quite good at mathematics" item as moderately true, yet hold an elaborate and salient network of knowledge about himself in the mathematics domain (e.g., of himself with regard to different topics in mathematics, of the objective value of being proficient in mathematics, etc.). In addition, reactive measures are not based on the individual's own categorization or organization of self-knowledge, and willingness to endorse particular descriptors presented in a standardized questionnaire may not tap into what is truly important to the individual. We present here results from an open-ended questionnaire, and document the rich array of responses we obtained from our college sample.

Research on self-concept has found consistent gender differences, such as males scoring higher on self-concepts of general ability, mathematical ability, athleticism, and physical appearance, and females scoring higher on self-concepts of verbal ability, quality of relationships, and honesty (e.g.,

Marsh and his colleagues). However, as discussed previously, the protocols used in these studies have simply focused on present selves, and while sound in terms of measurement properties, are limited methodologically for the reasons listed above. In the same vein, the inconsistent findings regarding ethnic differences in self-concept are considered to be due to methodological problems and faulty self-concept inventories (Widaman, MacMillan, Hemsley, Little, & Balow, 1992). Indeed, the methodological limitations of conventional measures of self-concept become more salient when dealing with minority populations: since the self-concept domains are pre-established by researchers constructing the questionnaires, there is little room for including domains that might be particularly important for different ethnic groups, especially with regard to possible selves. It is our optimistic contention that the new approach to measuring self-concept we present here is a step in the right direction; future research using this method for measuring self-concept may perhaps help shed light on some of the reasons for the well-documented gaps in achievement and enrollment patterns between males and females, and majority and minority students (e.g., National Research Council, 1991).

Accordingly, the research questions to be addressed in this paper are as follows. First, what hoped-for and feared possible selves do college students hold? Second, how do these possible selves vary by social group (i.e., gender and ethnicity)? Third, how do students who hold the same possible selves differ in their perceptions of: the likelihood of becoming that possible self; the importance of attaining (or avoiding) that possible self; and the efficacy to attain (or avoid) that possible self?

Method

Subjects

Participants were 126 college students enrolled in an introduction to educational psychology course at a large southwestern research university. Women comprised 49% of the sample (n = 62), and ethnic minorities constituted 39% of the sample (n = 49, mostly African-American (n = 21) and Latino (n = 20), and the remaining students of Asian or East Indian background). Because of the relatively small sample size, differences between ethnic groups were limited to comparisons between Anglo students and minority group students: a crosstabulation with gender resulted in the following cell ns: 38 Anglo males; 39 Anglo females; 26 minority males; and 23 minority females. Subjects participated in this study to fulfill their class research requirement. The survey instrument was administered approximately six weeks into the Spring 1994 semester.

Measures

Students' positive and negative possible selves were assessed using an open-ended protocol adapted from Cross & Markus (1991). Respondents were asked to think of what they were like in terms of academics ("We would like to know what you think is possible for you to become as a student. Imagine yourself at the beginning of your senior year of college") and to list three positive ("hoped-for") possible selves and three negative ("feared") possible selves. In order to assess the salience of the

different self-schemas, subjects were asked to rate each self-schema's importance (i.e., "How important is/how concerned are you about possibly becoming this way?") and to report how efficacious they felt about attaining positive possible selves and about avoiding negative possible selves. Finally, students were asked to estimate the likelihood of hoped-for and feared possible selves (i.e., "How likely is it that this will this describe you in the future?"). Subjects did not report any great difficulty using this format, and almost all of the students (98%, $n = 123$) were able to report at least two hoped-for possible selves and two feared possible selves.

Coding and analyses

Codes for the open-ended responses were created using a modified Delphi technique (Udinsky, Osterlind, & Lynch, 1981): six researchers each sampled twenty-one questionnaires, created their own categories based on the responses from their samples, and met to review the other researchers' categories. After two meetings, consensus was reached and 27 categories for both the hoped-for and feared possible selves were obtained. Three of these researchers then used this set of codes to code the self-schema data; interrater reliability was good, with the average Cohen's kappa at .84 and the average correlation among ratings at .86. Contingency table analyses and analyses of variance were used to examine differences among social groups. Analyses were performed only on the self-schemas which were reported by at least 10 subjects.

Results

Hoped-for possible selves: Frequencies

The four social groups (Anglo males, Anglo females, minority males, minority females) showed divergent patterns in the most frequently reported hoped-for possible selves (see Table 1). The two most frequently endorsed positive possible selves were clearly the "high GPA" and the "successful" selves. The high GPA self was most frequently reported by Anglo females (74.4%) and minority males (69.2%), and slightly less so for minority females (56.5%) and Anglo males (47.4%). The same pattern emerged for the successful self: this possible self was generated more often by minority males (46.4%) and Anglo females (38.5%), and slightly less so for minority females (30.4%) and Anglo males (26.3%). It is interesting to note that Anglo females and minority males were quite similar in their responses; the "intelligent/learned a lot" self was also reported more often by these individuals than by Anglo males or minority females. Minority males, however, did report the "on time to graduate" possible self more frequently than the other groups (26.9%). The only significant group difference among the hoped-for possible selves was in the "stick to study schedule" self. This self-schema was reported most frequently by minority females (39.1%), in contrast to only 10.5% of the Anglo males, 15.4% of the Anglo females, and 15.4% of the minority males ($\chi^2(3,126)=8.60$, $p < .05$). Our small sample size limited our statistical power; nevertheless, the patterns reported here offer us a description of the rich variety of possible selves held by college students.

Hoped-for possible selves: Future likelihood, importance, and efficacy

Several interactions emerged with regard to students' ratings of likelihood and importance. Females rated the "successful" self as more important to them than did males (*M*s = 6.86 vs. 6.18, *F*(1,40) = 5.38, *p* < .05). Minority students, compared to Anglo students, rated the "careful/responsible" possible self as less likely to describe them in the future (*M*s = 5.33 vs. 6.29, *F*(1,6) = 6.48, *p* < .05). One significant gender by ethnicity interaction was found, in the ratings of the likelihood of the "high GPA" possible self (*F*(1,74) = 5.06, *p* < .05, see Figure 1). Of the four social groups, minority females and minority males diverged most greatly in their ratings (*M*s = 5.77 for minority females and 4.78 for minority males). Anglo males and females' likelihood ratings were in the opposite direction, with Anglo males rating this self as more likely to describe them in the future (*M* = 5.33) than did Anglo females (*M* = 5.00).

Feared possible selves: Frequencies

It is interesting to note that while Anglo males seemed to focus on only two hoped-for possible selves in particular ("high GPA" and "successful"), this group of students held the widest array of frequently endorsed (i.e., reported by 25% or more of the group) negative possible selves (see Table 2). Anglo males' most frequently reported feared possible selves included: "low GPA"; "unsuccessful"; "not on time to graduate"; "disinterested in learning"; and "unfocused/slacker." Anglo females seemed to focus on performance-related feared possible selves, most often mentioning the "low GPA," "unsuccessful," and "not on time to graduate" selves. Minority males and minority females also reported these three possible selves most frequently; however, many minority males (30.8%) indicated that "disinterested in learning" was another feared self, while minority females named the "procrastinate" self as another self they wished to avoid. The only significant group difference among the feared possible selves was in the "no sense of accomplishment" self: only 3.2% of the males, but 16.1% of the females reported this particular concern ($\chi^2(1,126)=6.18$, *p* < .05).

Feared possible selves: Future likelihood, importance, and efficacy

Quite a few interactions emerged within the set of ratings for negative possible selves. Three of these interactions involved gender differences. Females reported relatively lower levels of efficacy for avoiding the "unsuccessful" (*M* = 4.77, versus 5.90 for males) and the "not on time to graduate" (*M* = 5.40, versus 6.19 for males) selves than males did (*F*(1,38)=4.19, *p* < .05 and *F*(1,47)=4.20, *p* < .05, respectively). In contrast, females' ratings of the importance of avoiding the "poor time manager" self were higher than those of males (*M*s = 6.38 and 4.20, *F*(1,9)= 5.39, *p* < .05). Three other interactions involved ethnic differences: minority students reported greater levels of efficacy in avoiding the "procrastinator" self (*M*s = 6.45 and 5.15, *F*(1,20)=10.89, *p* < .01); minority students reported greater levels of concern regarding the "disinterested in learning" self (*M*s = 6.40 versus 4.82, *F*(1,23)=10.61, *p* < .01); and minority students perceived the "not motivated" self as less likely to describe them in their senior year of college (*M*s = 1.60 and 3.42, *F*(1,13) = 5.36, p < .05) than did Anglo students. One gender by

ethnicity interaction did emerge from these analyses ($F(1,23=4.69$, $p < .05$, see Figure 2). Minority and Anglo females rated the importance of avoiding becoming disinterested in learning similarly (Ms = 5.71 and 5.50, respectively). In contrast, minority males reported the greatest levels of concern (M = 6.62), and Anglo males the lowest levels of concern (M = 4.20) about avoiding this negative possible self.

Discussion

The data presented in this paper, while limited to description, nevertheless offer us insight into the diverse and complex array of self-conceptions students hold. The open-ended technique employed here seems to be an effective way of tapping into these beliefs, for two reasons. First, students did not report any great difficulty in using this format, and were easily able to report upon their hoped-for and feared possible selves. Second, since we are using the respondent's construction of the self, not imposing that of the researcher, this is arguably a method which may prove to be a more valid technique for measuring self-beliefs. The domains generated by students differed dramatically from those typically found in conventional self-concept inventories. Although ability and performance were certainly themes one might expect to find in the responses to the open-ended questions (in effect demonstrating a crude form of convergent validity), themes relating to effort, study habits, motivation, and affect were also generated. This information would not have been brought to light had we used one of the more traditional measures of self-conceptions. These results depict the wide variety of self-schemas individuals possess, demonstrating the intricacy of the human motivational system.

We also found that the patterns of possible selves generated by students varied by gender and ethnicity. These differences in the content, as well as the differences in estimations of importance, efficacy, and likelihood seem to be a promising foundation from which to further explore the motivational components of learning. Students may carry the same self-schemas, but hold diverging beliefs regarding: the likelihood of attaining (or avoiding) that self; the importance of attaining (or avoiding) that self; and in the efficacy one feels for attaining (or avoiding) that self. If, as proposed, possible selves serve as personalized goals that one is motivated to approach or avoid (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986), future research examining differences in goal-directed behavior by levels of perceived likelihood, importance, and efficacy is called for (cf. Garcia, 1993; Pintrich, Garcia, & De Groot, 1994). We speculate that the higher one's estimates are of these three dimensions, the more clearly we would witness attempts to attain (or avoid) that possible self. Differing patterns of estimates of these dimensions may translate to affective consequences as well. High importance and low efficacy is a combination that may result in high levels of anxiety; low efficacy and high likelihood may lead to a sense of helplessness. For example, the females in this sample appeared to place very high importance on possible selves relating to effort and achievement, but report lower levels of efficacy (compared to males) in avoiding feared possible selves. This pattern may help explain the well-documented finding of greater anxiety being reported by females.

An issue that arises is whether self-schemas are just another measure of students' values and expectancies. In the sense that self-schemas are part of the human motivational system, which one can hardly discuss without referring to values and expectancies, yes, self-schemas can be seen as a measure of students' values and expectancies. However, self-schema theory extends both expectancy-value and goal theories of motivation by incorporating constructs such as expectancies, values, and goals within an integrated framework. Furthermore, that integrated framework is one that allows us to take full advantage of advances in cognitive psychology, and to incorporate models of thought, memory, and knowledge within our theories of "self-regulated learning." The integrated, social-cognitive framework that self-schema theory affords us allows us to attend to the phenomenological, agentic facets of learning: this puts the emphasis squarely on the *self* in self-regulated learning.

In sum, the results presented here indicate that incorporating the self-schema construct in our models of student learning and motivation would be advantageous. While the data here are self-report and need further validation, the findings suggest that additional studies of the role of the self in student learning and motivation would comprise a promising and exciting line of research.

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Table 1

Hoped-for possible self-schema frequencies by gender and ethnicity

	Anglo Males (n = 38)	Anglo Females (n = 39)	Minority Males (n = 26)	Minority Females (n = 23)
Achievement: Performance				
Good/improved/high GPA	47.4	74.4	69.2	56.5
Get into postgrad program, get a good job, marketable, successful	26.3	38.5	46.2	30.4
Achievement: Personal Characteristics				
On time to graduate, same major	15.8	12.8	26.9	13.0
Intelligent, smart, learned a lot	13.2	25.6	26.9	8.7
Effort				
Intensity: work/study/try hard	18.4	2.6	7.7	13.0
Studying: Skills and Personal Characteristics				
Careful, efficient, responsible, conscientious, dedicated	7.9	10.3	7.7	4.3
Studying: Habits and Time Management				
Stick to study schedule, good time management, organized	10.5	15.4	15.4	39.1
Motivation and Affective Reactions				
Motivated	15.8	5.1	3.8	8.7
Focused, have goals/priorities, committed	18.4	10.3	7.7	0.0

Note. Percent of students within each group are reported; column percents do not total to 100% because of multiple responses to the question.

Table 2

Feared possible self-schema frequencies by gender and ethnicity

	Anglo Males (n = 38)	Anglo Females (n = 39)	Minority Males (n = 26)	Minority Females (n = 23)
Achievement: Performance				
Low/poor GPA	45.9	61.5	50.0	43.5
Not get into postgrad program, not get a good job, unmarketable, failure	37.8	41.0	23.1	26.1
Achievement: Personal Characteristics				
Flunked out of college, not on time to graduate, changed major	37.8	33.3	46.2	52.2
Dumb, stupid, learn slowly	5.4	10.3	7.7	17.4
Effort				
Intensity: procrastinate, don't work/study/try hard	18.9	15.4	19.2	26.1
Studying: Habits and Time Management				
Don't/can't stick to study schedule, poor time management	5.4	10.3	11.5	17.4
Motivation and Affective Reactions				
Not motivated	18.9	12.8	11.5	8.7
Don't enjoy/disinterested in learning, unhappy with classes/major/school	27.0	17.9	30.8	8.7
Stressed, anxious, burned out	8.1	12.8	7.7	13.0
Unhappy, no sense of accomplishment, dissatisfied with choices made	2.7	17.9	3.8	13.0
Unfocused, don't have goals/priorities, uncommitted, slacker, bum	27.0	17.9	11.5	13.0

Note. Percent of students within each group are reported; column percents do not total to 100% because of multiple responses to the question.

Figure 1

Significant differences in the likelihood and importance of hoped-for possible selves.

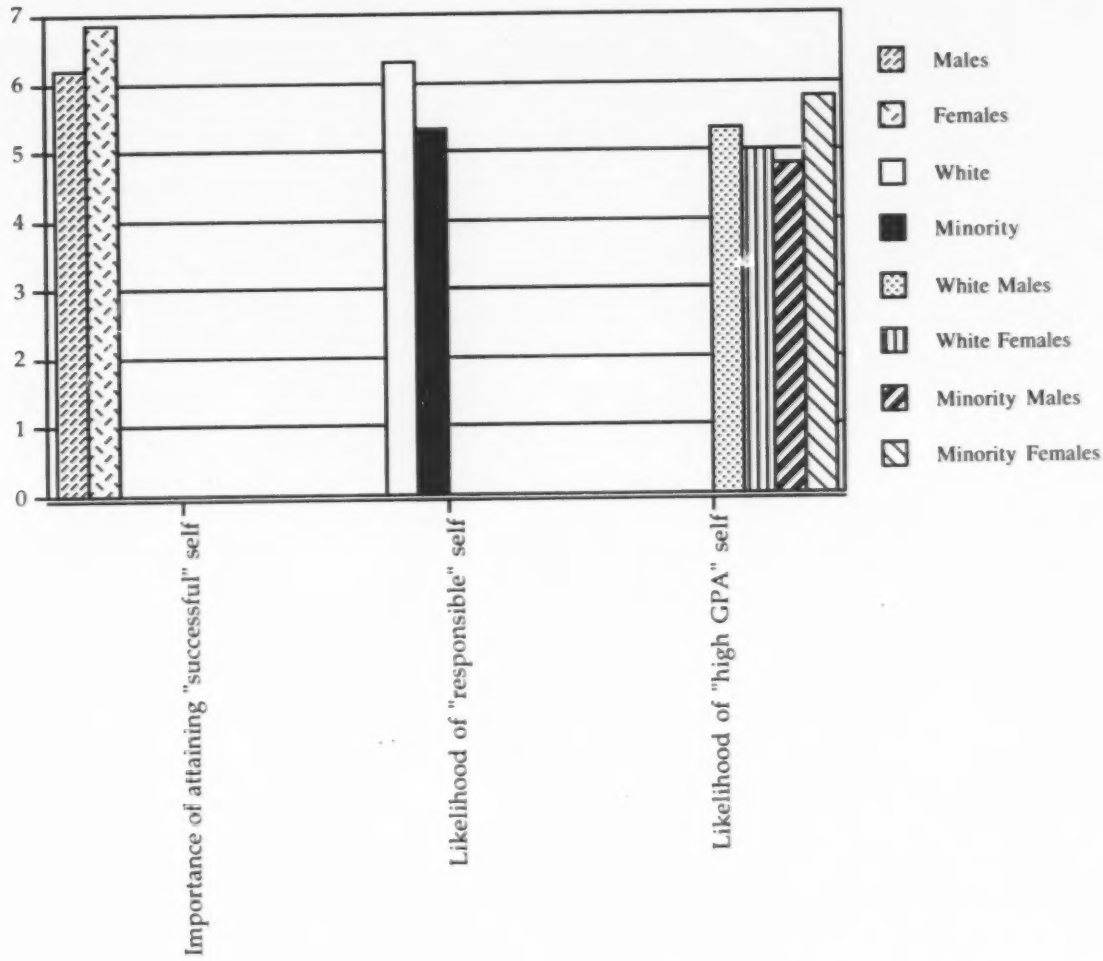

Figure 2

Significant differences in the likelihood, importance of avoiding, and efficacy in avoiding feared possible selves.